



Pre-race anxiety

Does a case of nerves help or hinder your race-day performance?

By Dr. Jordan Metz



This past October, I raced for the first time at the Ironman Triathlon World Championships in Hawaii. I felt I had done all I could to prepare for the race, but still, as the race approached I felt

increasingly excited, and nervous, and I found myself with far more questions than answers. Will I bonk? Will I stumble across the finish line? Will a shark see me as a tasty treat? Will I get seasick in the swim? Will the famed winds of Kona knock me off my bike? Will I become road kill in the blistering heat of the marathon? Will my brother Jamie make fun of me when he beats me?

Anxiety is frequently defined as an irrational fear, often resulting in physical manifestations including rapid breathing, increased heart rate and sweating. From the medical point of view, anxiety is probably a vestige of the evolutionary advantage popularly known as the fight-or-flight mechanism. This means that the body's response to perceived danger is to stimulate the autonomic nervous system, a complex system of nerves that makes us ready to face peril. When anxiety kicks in, the human body is ready for action. This makes sense. Running away from the saber-tooth tiger in the jungle surely selected the traits of anxiety over time. Those who didn't have this evolutionary advantage probably became tiger meat.

So here we are, thousands of years later, with bodies primed for anxiety. We face anxiety every day, whether we're running late for a meeting or standing at the start line of a triathlon. Sometimes, the anticipation of the event creates an anxious response well in advance. This is referred to as anticipatory anxiety. It might begin hours or even days before giving a big speech, taking an important test or starting a key race.

But what should we do with this anxiety? Dr. Glenn Brassington, a sports psychologist at Stanford University, tells the athletes he works with to "Visualize everything going right and break down each step in their minds, thinking of how it will work." Specifically, to boost confidence and alleviate self-doubt, Brassington encourages athletes to reflect on



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everything that went right during the months they spent preparing for an event and to recall the positive training experiences.

OK, let's try it. I envisioned a smooth swim with tropical fish and no sharks. On the bike, I saw myself cruising along in a comfortable aero position. On the run, I pictured good hydration, not too many cramps then a big smile as I finished and waited for my brother.

Were these images true? No way! Most were fantasy (especially beating my brother). However, they did help quell anticipatory anxiety. Imagining success can make the feelings of anxiety dissipate, regardless of the type or length of race in which you are participating.

PSYCH UP, NOT OUT

If all of your energy is spent worrying, anticipating and getting nervous, then the body doesn't work very well. Blood flow is diverted, needless calories are burned, sleep is lost and helpful energy is wasted in the days and hours before the race begins. A little bit of anxiety is probably healthy; it keeps the mind sharp

and the muscles ready to roll. But too much anxiety for too long before a race start can have a negative effect.

If you are an anxious athlete, try using positive imagery. In addition to focusing on what went right in your training leading up to the event, take your mind through every step of race day. Think about what time you'll wake up, what you'll eat for breakfast, what clothes you'll wear that day. See yourself getting set in transition, comfortably loosening up for the start of the swim and then gliding along in the water. Take yourself through the race from start to finish. The tools for success in this area are different for everyone, but usually, a good sports psychologist can help find the best individual path to an anxiety-free start. ▲

Jordan D. Metzl, MD, is a nationally recognized sports-medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. In addition, Dr. Metzl is a 25-time marathoner and four-time Ironman finisher.